



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

## NEWS RELEASE

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## **SOUTHERN IDAHO GROUND SQUIRREL RESEARCH TO BE CONDUCTED IN WEISER RIVER BASIN**

Researchers from Boise State University and Albertson College of Idaho, in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and Idaho Department of Fish and Game, will begin research on the southern Idaho ground squirrel in the Weiser River Basin this February. The relationship between habitat and reproduction and survival rates will be examined. It is hoped that the research project, scheduled to continue for a two-year period, will help identify possible reasons for the decline in ground squirrel numbers in this area.

The southern Idaho ground squirrel (*Spermophilus brunneus endemicus*) is known to occur within an 810-square mile area in Gem, Washington and Payette counties. Its historic range once extended into Adams County, but surveys have not substantiated any occupied sites in that county. The ground squirrel has suffered a dramatic population decline in the past 30 years. In 1985, its population was estimated at around 40,000 individuals. A 2001 survey of the known and historical population sites revealed that the total population may be as few as 2,000 to 4,500 animals. A 1999 survey of 145 of the 180 known historical population sites revealed that only 53 sites (37 percent) were still occupied, with most of these sites containing fewer than 20 individuals.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified the species as a candidate in the *Candidate Notice of Review* on October 30, 2001. A candidate species is a plant or animal for which the Service has on file sufficient information on biological vulnerability and threats to support a proposal to list as threatened or endangered, but issuance of a proposed rule is precluded by higher priority listing actions.

In addition to the research studies, population site surveys will be conducted on BLM, State, Idaho Power and private lands from late February through June. Surveys on private land will be by permission only. Monitoring

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of ground squirrels that were translocated in 2001 from the Rolling Hills Golf Course in Weiser to private lands near Midvale will also resume this field season, and additional ground squirrels will be trapped and relocated into suitable habitat. It is hoped that the translocation efforts will help reestablish additional populations of ground squirrels in formerly occupied habitat.

The southern Idaho ground squirrel is about 8-9" long, with a short, narrow tail, tan feet and ears, and a grey-brown throat. Its coat is noticeably paler than a similar subspecies from a nearby range, the northern Idaho ground squirrel. Research suggests these animals prefer areas with a high percentage of native cover such as big sagebrush, bitterbrush and a variety of native forbs and grasses; however, some nonnative features may enhance their survival such as alfalfa fields, haystacks or fence lines.

These small-eared mammals spend much of their time underground. Adults emerge from seasonal hibernation in late January or early February, depending on elevation and habitat conditions. As with other ground squirrels in the northwest, the adults have a short active season above ground of 4 to 5 months. During this time, the animals feed on large quantities of grass seed, stems and green leafy vegetation which are required for storage of fat to survive long months of hibernation. When squirrels emerge from their burrows, they begin breeding; young are born about three weeks later and emerge from the nest burrow in about 50 days. The ground squirrels cease their above-ground activity by late June or early July to return to their burrows for hibernation.

Threats to southern Idaho ground squirrels include exotic grasses and weeds; habitat fragmentation; killing from shooting, trapping or poisoning; predation; and competition with Columbian ground squirrels (*Spermophilus columbianus*). Most of these threats occur throughout the range of the species.

For more information about the research, please contact field representatives from any of the participating four agencies.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 94-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 535 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.